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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of focus group measurements can be traced to any one of four factors: (1) the economics associated with focus groups; (2) the speed at which data can now be collected; (3) the need to understand customer motivations; and (4) the desire to improve subsequent qualitative research activities and programs. Market researchers are striving to reduce the inherent problems and biases associated with all research forms, especially "paper and pencil" data methods. The end result has been a shift toward the use of "Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing" (CAPI), in which respondents enter the information directly into the computer. Exploratory, clinical, and experiencing are the three types of focus groups. A 9-step process is used to administer a focus group. Beyond the use of focus groups methodology, there are four emerging trends, including the telephone focus group, 2-way focus groups, focus group television networks, and nominal grouping sessions. As the marketplace continues to become more competitive, there will be continued interest in customer "buying and usage decisions," in turn spawning further interest in CAPI focus groups. Additional advancements in hardware, software, and delivery system technology will also expand focus group sample sizes and remove subjective interpretations normally associated with qualitative measures. Cost reductions, the growing emphasis on "short-term" performance, and consumer privacy issues will work to further the development of qualitative research--like the Computer-Mediated Focus Group--over quantitative measurements. (CR)

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CONDUCTING THE COMPUTER-MEDIATED FOCUS GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

In a time of fierce global competition and ever-changing consumer demands, Businesses and Organizations alike are employing qualitative measurements and advanced data collection tools to learn and understand what their customers want in a product or service and why they purchase. (Kotler 1997)

More specifically, the growing popularity of focus group measurements can be traced to anyone of four factors: first, the economics associated with focus groups; second, the speed at which data can now be collected - especially with the advancement of hardware, software and internet technology; third, the need to understand customer motivations and feelings; and fourth, the desire to improve subsequent quantitative research activities and programs. McDaniel and Gates (1996) reinforce the strong popularity in qualitative measures as they suggest that nearly 50,000 focus groups are conducted
yearly in the United States.

Secondly, market researchers are also striving to reduce the inherent problems and biases associated with all research forms - especially "Paper-And-Pencil" data methods. Historical issues include: interviewer biases when administering the questions in particular, the way the questions are asked; bias when collecting the data; bias when translating and entering the information into the database; and bias when summarizing the findings. The end result has been a shift towards the use of "Computer-Assisted-Personal-Interviewing" (CAPI) over "Paper-And-

Pencil" methods.

The CAPI method involves having respondents enter the information directly into the computer, thus "minimizing response biases, eliminating biases caused by interviewer interpretation of the data, and the reduction of recording errors." (Malhorta 1993)

This paper will explore the basic requirements associated with conducting one unique form of focus groups - the Computer-Mediated focus group.

FOCUS GROUP FORMS

Calder (1977) suggests there are three types of focus groups: exploratory; clinical; and experiencing. "Exploratory" focus group's can be assigned numerous tasks ranging from defining the research problem to generating a hypothesis. For example, Bausch and Lomb employed exploratory research to evaluate several packaging options - such as logo colorization, color coding of products, use of numbers to designate heat versus chemical systems - for its soft contact lenses. (Shapiro, 1990)

"Clinical" focus groups explore the true meanings of a person's motivations or feelings by going beyond the conscious into the subconscious. For example, when purchasing a new BMW 740i, a customer may say that they bought it because it was a great deal - ignoring the mention that the auto purchase helped them overcome prior feelings of inferiority or failure.

"Experiencing" focus groups distinguish themselves in that the consumers have had physical contact with the product. Lewis Stone,

former manager for Colgate-Palmolive states that "If it weren't for focus groups, Colgate-Palmolive might never know that some women squeeze their bottles of diswashing soap, others squeeeeze them, and still others squeeeeeeeeeeze out the desired amount. Then there are the ones who use the soap 'neat.' That is, they put the product directly on a sponge or washcloth and wash the dish under running water until the suds run out. Then they apply more detergent."(Campbell 1988)

If we were to take a poll on how you dispense dishwashing soap, in what category would you fit?

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP

Once a format is selected, you can begin the nine-step process of administering a focus group as described by Malhorta (1993).

Step One, "Problem Definition," entails forming a clear statement concerning the purpose of the research. For example, "What caused students to select our institution over other regional Universities?" It is imperative that consensus be acquired from all parties before moving on. As changing course downstream can have devastating results.

The Second Step, "Stating Focus Group Objectives," directly links the audience with the primary problem at hand. For example, you may want to: know the relevant factors, which drove the decision; learn about the student's alternative educational choices; determine any psychological factors; and review any demographic and/or socieconomic factors.

The Third Step, "Writing the Screening Questionnaire," involves recruiting participants. When recruiting, you must consider what combination or mix of customers or subjects will work best. Should we limit our research to present or future students, pleased or unhappy students, traditional or non-traditional students, domestic or international students, etc. The Computer-Mediated approach offers a distinct timesaving as questions as well as sample populations can be automatically generated using current software packages.

Step Four required "Selecting a Moderator and developing a Discussion Guide." The first part includes selecting a moderator to lead the discussions from broad issues to more specific ones, as well as the creation of a discussion guide to cover the critical research questions. Moderator's normally have some training in either psychology or social psychology and are comfortable working with small groups. Personal traits include: kindness with firmness; permissiveness; understanding; flexibility; and sensitivity.

The discussion guide is a critical tool to the success of a focus group as it contains an outline of the topics to be covered in the rapport building, issue review and discussion, and summarization sections.

Step Five, "Selecting Respondents," is greatly enhanced with today's advanced information technologies. For example, not only can "focus groups" be established around the globe, but you can acquire immediate feedback via modems and the Internet. You can also establish "chat networks" that provide direct access to

current or prospective global customers, and quickly construct tailored data bases from which to select prospective participants.

In Step Six, "Conduct Interviews," the focus group is run and the data is collected. Personal experience has shown there is a direct relationship between preparation and quality of the research results. So many times, businesses rush into focus group sessions without the required preparation, and then wonder why the results did not meet expectations. The answer is simple. Prepare, prepare, prepare!

The most common focus group data collection methods have been video/audio taping and "Paper-And-Pencil" with a shift toward Computer-Mediated where it has been proven to provide a distinct advantage over traditional methods in relation to time, energy, and dollars. See Table 1 - Comparative Evaluation of Survey Method by Malhorta (1993).

Step Seven, "Review and Analyze Data, entails the preparation of the Focus Group Report which takes one of two forms; the instant analysis or the formal report. During the instant analysis the moderator plus an organizational representative conduct a debriefing shortly after the focus group to acquire "top of mind" perceptions in a brainstorming environment. The formal report process goes through a regimented series of steps of listening, copying down relevant facts, and then interpreting the results. Needless-to-say, there are pros and cons to each reporting method.

Step Eight, "Summarize the Findings," is traditionally been a slow process when employing the Face-to-Face as opposed to the

Computer-Mediated approach. By utilizing large vocabulary sets, rank order analyses, and key word recognition the findings can be quickly formed and discussed.

Step Nine, "Follow-up," is again more effective with Computer-Mediated groups as it is both quick and easy to conduct any follow-up activity with past participants. This is especially helpful with any "time-series" designs or experiments.

TRENDS IN FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Beyond the growing usage of focus groups methodology, McDaniel and Gates (1996) see four emerging trends:

- With the splintering of the traditional family and time restraints of professionals, there has been a significant growth in *Telephone Focus Groups*.
- A second trend is *Two-Way Focus Groups* where one group first observes another focus group, then expresses their own opinions on the subject.
- A third trend is the advent of *Focus Group Television Networks* such as the FocusVision Network. Here the marketer can interface with focus groups from around the globe through independently owned transmission facilities.
- *Nominal Grouping Sessions* is the final trend whereby small groups of customer are brought together to generate ideas about a subject and then discuss a limited number of those ideas.

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FUTURE OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED FOCUS GROUPS

As the marketplace continues to become more competitive, there will be continued interest in customer "buying and usage decisions" such that Organizations and Businesses can create and sustain their competitive advantage over the competition. (Morgan 1988). This will in turn spawn further interest in "Computer-Aided" or "CAPI" Focus Groups.

Additional advancements in hardware, software and delivery system technology will also expand focus group sample sizes and remove subjective interpretations normally associated with qualitative measures. And last, cost reductions, the growing emphasis on "short-term" performance and consumer privacy issues will work to further the development of qualitative research - like the Computer-Mediated Focus group - over quantitative measurements.

A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF SURVEY METHODS

CRITERIA	TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS	IN-HOME	MALL INTERCEPT	CAPI	MAIL SURVEYS
Flexibility of Data Collection	Moderate	High	High	Moderate to High	Low
Diversity of Questions	Low	High	High	High	Moderate
Use of Physical Stimuli	Low	Moderate to High	High	High	Moderate
Sample Control	Moderate to High	Potentially High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Control of Data Collection Environment	Moderate	Moderate to High	High	High	Low
Control of Field Force	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High
Quantity of Data	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Response Rate	Moderate	High	High	High	Low
Perceived Anonymity of the Respondent	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	High
Social Desirability	Moderate	High	High	High	Low
Obtaining Sensitive Information	High	Low	Low	Low to Moderate	High
Potential for Interviewer Bias	Moderate	High	High	Low	None
Speed	High	Moderate	Moderate to High	Moderate to High	Low
Cost	Moderate	High	Moderate to High	Moderate to High	Low

Source: Malhorta, N.K. Marketing Research - An Applied Orientation, p 197.

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